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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that schools apparently fail to match reading instruction to children's needs, this study was conducted to learn about the process of changing teacher behavior in such a way that a match exists between what is taught and who is being taught. Year-long observation of one kindergarten program that was supplemented with attempts to effect instruction that reflected the children's abilities was conducted. Standard curriculum was to provide instruction for colors, shapes, letters, numbers, words, and letter-sound correspondences. The teacher's tendency to spend more time with the least able children became apparent early in the year and never changed. An equally persistent practice of the teacher was to cover too much with the poorer students and too little with the others. Another tendency was to assign equal importance to everything. The usefulness of knowing a particular letter-sound correspondence had no effect on the amount of instructional time it received. The 28 observation periods which occurred during the year supported the conclusion that the teacher continued to assign unique importance to phonics even though a multifaceted conception of beginning reading instruction was persistently recommended and discussed. Interviews revealed that it seems likely that what was considered to be a means for achieving matched instruction was seen by the teacher as a reason to worry even more. Abandoning the long traditions of a lockstep curriculum is a very slow process, requiring much more than one year. (MG)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Technical Report No. 499

MATCHING CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION WITH READING ABILITIES: AN UNMET NEED

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Abstract

The widespread failure of schools to match reading instruction to children's needs is the underlying theme of this report. Three of the factors that account for such a shortcoming are identified: large class size, dependence on basal reader materials, and questionable testing practices. How dependence on basal materials leads to a "standard" curriculum for all children, beginning as early as kindergarten, receives special attention. The difficulty of getting teachers to provide differentiated instruction when they use basal materials is also discussed, with references to a year-long effort to alter one kindergarten teacher's goals and behavior.

MATCHING CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION WITH READING ABILITIES: AN UNMET NEED

Over the years I have conducted a sizeable number of studies in which classroom observations of reading instruction provided the data. My reasons for being in elementary schools varied; what remained constant is that every class I observed was composed of students who were dissimilar in their reading proficiency. Even when interclass groups were organized for the stated purpose of providing teachers with "homogeneous" classes for reading instruction, differences in students' reading abilities became apparent in observations as brief as one hour or less.

Factors Impeding Differentiated Instruction

Based on what I have observed and still see, the need to adjust classroom instruction in ways that accommodate differences in students' abilities remains largely unfulfilled. A number of factors make differentiated instruction a rarity. In this report, I will discuss three of these factors: large class size, dependence on basal reader materials, and questionable testing practices.

Large Class Size

One indisputable reason for the lack of differentiated instruction is the difficulty of achieving a match between abilities and instruction when, as is usually the case, one teacher is responsible for a large number of students. A ratio such as 28 to 1 creates problems not only for classroom management but also for teachers to know the specific ways in which members of a class differ in their ability to read.

Curriculum Defined by Basal Reader Materials

Another reason for the paucity of classrooms in which instructional programs are adapted to particular students is the traditional--and unfortunate--allegiance to a "standard" curriculum. With very few exceptions, such a curriculum for reading is defined not by the decisions of professional educators but by the basal reader series a school is using. The unique influence these materials enjoy has a number of consequences that discourage teachers from offering instruction that meets the needs of their students.

For one thing, dependence on a basal series fosters more attention to "covering material" than to selecting both important and suitable instructional objectives. As a result, teachers may be more concerned about what they will have students do than about what they hope students will learn.

Related to these consequences of an indiscriminate use of basal materials is another that has to do with what I call "mentioning" (Durkin, 1978-79). Even though mentioning (defined as "saying just enough about a topic to allow students to do an exercise related to it") may not be a serious impediment to the progress of bright students, it hardly provides low achievers with the kind of teaching they need in order to attain even modest success. Let me specify what I mean by mentioning with an illustration from a new basal reader manual.

An objective of one of the many lessons in the manual is to teach the suffixes *-ful*, *-less*, and *-y*. The timing of the objective is questionable, as the selection that students are supposed to read next has no derivatives using any of these three suffixes. What does deal with all three are two exercise sheets that may encourage some teachers to replace sufficiently detailed instruction with mentioning. A description of one of the two exercises accompanying the lesson will explain why mentioning may be sufficient for

doing exercises but not, in this case, for dealing with unfamiliar derivatives that are embedded in authentic text.

At the top of the exercise sheet, students are reminded that they have learned about the suffixes *-ful*, *-less*, and *-y*. They are then directed to read a list of words on the left-hand side of the sheet in order to write in a column on the right-hand side only those words that have suffixes. All the words that do have suffixes just happen to end with *ful*, *less*, or *y*. Correct choices can thus be made merely by scanning the final letters in the listed words.

An exercise such as this one--and it is hardly atypical--should clarify not only the meaning of "mentioning" but also why giving students assignments they are able to do is not the same as providing instruction that, first, matches their current level of ability and, second, has something to do with real reading.

Allington (1980, 1983) has asserted that low achievers are not helped to arrive at an understanding of "real reading" because of the common use of overly difficult basal materials. He claims, for example, that the large amount of time spent on individual words relative to the small amount of time given to the meaning of connected text obscures the nature of the reading process. In an article that summarizes studies of instructional groups in classrooms, Shannon (1985) makes the same point:

> Students in high groups are often asked to read text which is easy for them; however, students in low groups are often placed in difficult material in which they misread at least one in every ten words. This difficulty inhibits low group students' use of context, forces them to read word by word, and makes them rely on phonic characteristics of unknown words. Their frequent mistakes trigger student and teacher interruptions, and the unfortunate cycle begins anew. (p. 608)

Accountability and Testing

In recent years, another impediment to offering suitable classroom instruction has been highly visible. I refer to the unusual importance assigned to test scores, even when they derive from instruments made up of items that have little to do with the requirements of successful reading. More specifically, when accountability is related to children's performance on tests, teachers are hardly encouraged to reflect in a professional way about how they might best help low-performing students.

To illustrate this, let me refer to a third-grade class I observed recently. For part of the time, the teacher was with four boys who were taking turns reading aloud from a basal reader that was obviously too difficult for them. Later, when I discussed the difficulty with the teacher, she said without hesitation, "They're going to have to take a third-grade test, so they had better learn to read a third-grade book."

Recent Classroom Observations

Concern about the negative impact that both testing and basal reader materials can have on instructional programs accounts for my most recent classroom observations. These were year-long observations of one kindergarten program that were supplemented with attempts to effect instruction that reflected the children's abilities (Durkin, 1989). Explaining why efforts were made to change customary practices requires a reference to observations carried out the previous year.

Observations of Kindergarten Classes

During the previous year, two assistants and I observed each of 42 kindergarten classes on two successive days in order to learn what was being done either to prepare kindergartners for reading or to teach reading itself (Durkin, 1987a, 1987b). As it turned out, teaching reading in all the classes was equated with teaching phonics. In all the classes, too, phonics instruction came directly from basal workbooks and was always offered to no less than the whole class.

Use of whole class instruction was the practice even when differences in children's abilities were so great as to be obvious to anyone willing to take only a few minutes to observe. Such differences meant that some children kept hearing what they already knew; for others, the observed lesson was too difficult and proceeded too quickly. When interviewed, the teachers' explanations for the reliance on whole class instruction inevitably referred to the need for all the children to learn all the consonant sounds because that was what was tested at the end of the year.

Reform Efforts: Achieving Instruction That Reflects Abilities

Because of what I saw in these kindergartens, I spent time the next year in just one kindergarten. The main purpose was to learn about the process of changing teacher behavior in such a way that a match exists between what is taught and who is being taught. The kindergarten teacher chosen for observation had not been in the earlier study; however, visiting her classroom showed practices that were similar to those I had seen in the earlier study. The second, equally important reason for selecting this teacher was the great--even enthusiastic--interest she expressed in replacing customary practices with an instructional program that accommodated the needs of all the children who were her responsibility.

The rest of this report will deal with some of what I learned about the change process while observing and working with this teacher. Because the whole of what was learned is described elsewhere (Durkin, 1989), this report concentrates on the difficulty of altering customary practices in the face of a "standard" curriculum.

Standard Curriculum: Some Components

To start, some pre-established subject matter for the kindergarten will be described; after that, problems related to it will be discussed.

Beginning of the Year

Part of the standard curriculum for the beginning of the year included teaching a prescribed number of colors, shapes, letters, and numbers. Previously, the teaching was done with the whole class; the teacher's intention was to have everyone "up to standard" by the end of the year. Only children who trailed classmates in major ways received additional but brief amounts of help at unplanned times.

To provide more differentiated instruction, I recommended to the teacher that she move from whole class instruction to teaching two groups daily, organized on the basis of needs. This modest proposal was made to avoid what might be perceived by the kindergarten teacher as a sweeping change. A related proposal I made to her was to learn as soon as possible what each entering kindergartner knew about the names of colors, shapes, letters, and numbers so that instructional groups could be organized to allow for teaching students what they didn't know.

Individual tests were administered the first week of school by well-trained fifth graders. (Elementary school students were chosen because the kindergarten teachers who had been observed the previous year said they were unable to give tests to identify differences without the assistance of a teacher aide or

some other adult.) For all the tests administered (colors, shapes, numbers, lowercase letters, capital letters, and numbers), achieved scores ranged from zero to 100 percent.

The wide variability in student performance clearly supported the need for something other than whole class instruction. However, the differences also prompted the teacher to suggest that more time should be allocated to the slowest children in spite of an earlier agreement to give equal time to both groups. Reminded that the objective of our combined efforts was to provide suitable instruction for all so as to avoid both frustration and boredom, the teacher agreed to what had been decided originally. As will be seen, however, her worries about covering the pre-established curriculum resulted in altering the agreement.

Later On in the Year

Another part of the standard curriculum was the 19 consonant sounds covered in the basal readiness workbook. The teacher's customary practice was to start whole class phonics instruction in January and to introduce two new sounds each week. The sequence for instruction matched the order in which the workbook dealt with the sounds. Again, brief amounts of extra help were given intermittently to children who lagged behind the others in major ways.

The new proposal was to teach consonant sounds to two instructional groups in connection with the words the children were learning to read. The recommendation was made on the assumption that this procedure makes phonics meaningful. In previous years, no conscious effort was made to build reading vocabularies; instead, beginning reading instruction was equated with teaching phonics as an abstract, decontextualized skill. The new recommendation resulted in starting phonics instruction in early November. The focus was the sound for /j/ because an unusually large number of children had given names that began with *J*.

Standard Curriculum: A Few Consequences

Some of the effects that the pre-established curriculum had on the teacher's behavior were noticeable from the beginning of the year and persisted until the end. The most encompassing effect, however, was not revealed until the first of three debriefing interviews took place with the teacher, starting in April. Initial effects are discussed first.

Early Effects of A Standard Curriculum

As mentioned, one negotiated decision was to provide instruction for colors, shapes, letters, numbers, words, and letter-sound correspondences to two groups of children organized on the basis of needs. (Brief, informal tests were given throughout the year in order to identify needed instruction.) Even though it had been agreed that the two groups would receive equal amounts of time, the teacher's tendency to spend more time with the least able children became apparent early in the year and never changed. A related, equally persistent practice of the teacher was to cover too much with the poorer students and too little with the others.

These persistent tendencies--even though reasons to alter them were discussed repeatedly--explain why I often thought about a comment made by one of the kindergarten teachers in the previous study. Asked what she thought was especially difficult about teaching kindergarten, she replied, "There is great variation in what comes to you." She then added, "But by the end of the year, they're more leveled out." In the case of the kindergarten program being observed, "leveling out" meant that the two instructional groups did not succeed in eliminating a common consequence of whole class instruction: insufficient challenge for the brightest and frustration for the slowest.

When a teacher's goal is to cover pre-established subject matter, another tendency is to assign equal importance to everything. In the observed kindergarten, such a tendency was especially apparent when the teacher worked with the slowest children. If the topic was letter names, for instance, as much attention would go to letters such as *x* and *q* as went to others such as *s* and *t*. The same pattern existed when phonics was taught: The usefulness of knowing a particular letter-sound correspondence had no effect on the amount of instructional time it received. Even though the teacher was often reminded that knowing important things well is more helpful to children than knowing a great deal of things less well, her behavior indicated that the recommended distinctions were not made.

The Most Encompassing Effect of the Standard Curriculum

Anyone present in this teacher's room prior to the intervention could not help but conclude that phonics was assigned considerable importance, and that it was taught in a drill-like fashion to the whole class without ever relating it to decoding words. The 28 classroom observations that occurred during the year of our work supported the conclusion that the teacher continued to assign unique importance to phonics even though a multifaceted conception of beginning reading instruction was persistently recommended and discussed during post-observation meetings. Nonetheless, the fact that phonics was the teacher's *overwhelming* concern was not uncovered until the first of three interviews took place in April. By then it was clear that the consulting efforts were hardly a stunning success; consequently, the major purpose of the first interview was to learn how I could have been more helpful. Unexpectedly, this and the two subsequent interviews revealed that all the time I was promoting balance in subject matter for reading instruction, the teacher was worrying about phonics. The very first interview question, and the teacher's response to it, follow:

D: How could I have been more helpful?

T: I would have liked to have had the whole year mapped out. For example, in September and October, we'll work on these letters and sounds.

As the teacher's response shows, the major objective of the consulting efforts--matching instruction with abilities--was apparently lost in the anxiety created by the concern about phonics. After acknowledging in an interview that she tried to cover too much too quickly with the poorer students, the teacher explained her behavior as follows.

T: I had this fear in the back of my mind that we weren't covering as much as I did last year.

D: Why did you think that?

T: I wasn't getting to the phonics, and that's my major thrust.

D: But you said you didn't start phonics last year until January.

T: I know, but for some reason I thought I wasn't going as quickly this year because I was doing, like, about one sound a week.

D: Was it just the phonics that was a worry?

T: That was the main worry.

D: But you started to teach phonics earlier this year--in November.

T: I know, but there's just something about covering those pages in the workbook, and that you're going to do two sounds a week. You know where you're going.

Because matching instruction with abilities was the most frequently discussed topic during the whole of the year, the following interview responses were also unexpected:

D: In addition to phonics, what else was a worry?

T: I was concerned about the children being at different levels.

D: Last year there must have been differences.

T: But with whole class instruction, you're covering the same thing with everyone.

That covering subject matter with excessively long periods of drill was not likely to be successful with slower children was another topic that was discussed repeatedly during post-observation meetings; consequently, the teacher was asked to talk about this in an interview:

T: You get the feeling they're going to be hit with all this in first grade. I had better get this all covered. And you get to the point where you feel they've at least got to hear it.

D: Did *I* ever say anything that encouraged you to do too much for too long with the slower children?

T: No, I think it was in myself. I felt I've got to cover as much as I can.

D: Even when the children get restless?

T: Yes. I'd think that if I held them for a few more minutes. Last year it was every day, and I'd drill and drill. Even though I knew that not all the children were getting phonics with whole class instruction, I thought that by exposing them, maybe they'd catch it.

D: Do you recall my recommending that if you saw restlessness among the slower children, it might be a time to shift to something else--for instance, to interesting pictures that would encourage the children to talk?

T: I had them talk about pictures in the phonics book.

Just how important the phonics book actually was is revealed in another interview exchange. This one followed the teacher's reference to the number of pages she had used in the basal workbook. Because she was never observed using the workbook, I commented:

D: I didn't know you were using all these workbook pages.

T: I would be embarrassed if someone saw all I didn't do because they already knew it. I have skipped some pages. I'll be honest. I pretty much do follow the book.

The possibility that all the efforts that were made to improve the kindergarten reading program may have fallen on deaf ears is suggested by the last interview response that will be quoted now. It was made after I inquired about when the workbooks had been used:

> *T:* I chose workbook pages as I taught the sounds. That *was* a problem. I know there were pages I lost or skipped. It was such a hodgepodge. Next year, I'll follow the pages in the order in the book.

Discussion

Because of the many times I've been in classrooms, I have not hesitated to state in talks, articles, and textbooks that too many teachers define their responsibilities in relation to "covering material." Nevertheless, it wasn't until I interviewed the teacher just referred to that I *really* understood the meaning of my own words. In her case, what seemed like a compulsive dedication to covering all the sounds that were in a workbook resulted in considerable worry, which was made graphic during the interviews.

Interestingly, differences in the size of the kindergartners' reading vocabularies, which were apparent throughout the year, were never referred to in post-observation meetings or during any of the interviews. (The number of words that the children identified in the end-of-year test I administered ranged from 8 to 106; the mean score was 62.) The omission serves to reinforce the unique importance assigned to the "standard" curriculum for reading: 19 sounds. The question that needs to be considered, therefore, is, *Why* did the teacher feel such pressure to "get all these sounds covered?"

To begin to consider the question, let me start by requoting the teacher: "You get the feeling they're going to be hit with all this in first grade. I had better get this all covered. And you get to the point where you feel they've at least got to hear it."

Although references to the two first-grade teachers who worked in the same building were deliberately omitted from discussions, I did inquire about first-grade reading materials and learned that both teachers used a basal series that reteaches the sounds dealt with in the readiness workbook. Both also used a second basal series that is well known for the early attention it gives to phonics. It seems clear that this combination of materials makes no contribution to explaining why the kindergarten teacher felt so compelled to teach a specified number of sounds to everyone. In fact, it could be argued that the first-grade materials should have encouraged her to concentrate on anything *except* phonics.

Given the fact that administrators are sometimes cited by teachers as the reason to abide by the standard curriculum, I also asked the kindergarten teacher about her principal's philosophy regarding the use of workbooks. Her response was:

> Cover as much as you can, but there's no sense in covering it all if they can't do it. I've heard him say this to other teachers, too.

With the additional pieces of information, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that for some unidentified reason, this kindergarten teacher equated success in teaching beginning reading with covering the phonics content of a workbook and, further, that the failure to expose every child to that content was a cause for anxiety for her. Even the fact that many of her children were acquiring sizeable reading vocabularies did not help to reduce her worry.

Because such a view of responsibilities is incompatible with the central goal of the reform efforts (matching instruction to needs), it is only natural to wonder why this teacher not only volunteered to participate, but did so with enthusiasm. One possible explanation is that she endorsed the goal at a romantic rather than a realistic level. That she had not thought through the essence of "matched instruction" is attested to by her response to the very first interview question: "I would have liked to have had the whole year mapped out. For example, in September and October we'll work on these letters and sounds." Even though sequences for covering various kinds of subject matter were "mapped out" before the school year began, the omission of exactly what was to be taught when must have been a serious one for the teacher even though she made no reference to it at the time. It is likely, too, that *my* attempts to achieve suitable instruction for all the children were viewed by the teacher as thwarting *her* attempts to cover the same subject matter with everyone.

In retrospect, it also seems likely that what I considered to be a means for achieving "matched instruction"--namely, periodic tests to identify needs--was seen by the teacher as a reason to worry even more. This is suggested by the fact that the scores pinpointed how little some children were learning. In turn, that may have served to reinforce a practice that was questioned constantly: "drill and drill" with the slowest.

Not to be overlooked is that the same curriculum-based measurements also showed the wonderful progress that other children were making. And this brings me to the final point I want to make: The teacher's concern about not covering enough phonics with everyone narrowed her focus to the point that she was not able to see and enjoy all the good things that were happening. Only once, in fact, did she refer to the children's accomplishments during the interviews. At the time, she was comparing the current year with the previous one:

> Last year the children could read some individual words, but they didn't do any real reading. Now they're excited about being able to read. They surprise the heck out of me. I think sometimes they surprise the heck out of themselves. They talk to each other about how they can read. There's so much enthusiasm.

As every human knows, changing behavior and perspective is a difficult developmental process. The hope, therefore, is that in time, the hard-working teacher who has been the focus of this report will be able to enjoy the full array of accomplishments that are the fruit of her labor.

Meanwhile, what has been reclarified for me is that having a vision of the possible is far removed from making it "happen." The message for others is that abandoning the long traditions of a lockstep curriculum is a very slow process, requiring much more than one school year. The more specific message for early childhood educators is that the traditional belief that kindergarten is child-centered may now be a thing of the past.

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